Being Two Spirit

Opening in a Good Way

Introducing the Presenter

The lenses through which I look

Setting Group Agreements

“What works for us is who we are. It is empowering. We know our blood, we know our heritage.”
-- Carol J. Jorgensen, TLINGIT

“I am convinced that if we look deep into our respectful tribal pasts, we can identify those ideas, values, instructions, and institutions that enable our culture to thrive.”
-- David Wilkins, LUMBEE
Our Objectives Today

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Examine</th>
<th>Employ</th>
<th>Apply</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>At the end of this presentation, participants will be able to:</td>
<td>Examine the history and health care challenges experienced by Two Spirit people in order to provide the best possible care.</td>
<td>Employ suicide safer care through screening, assessment and safety planning that resonate with Two Spirit people.</td>
<td>Apply strategies for ensuring safety for Two Spirit youth, including those affected by bullying.</td>
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A LITTLE BIT OF HISTORY...

Many things contributed to the discrimination faced by Two Spirit people today, but none more powerful than the Residential/Boarding School era...

The Carlisle Indian Industrial School

This school was the model for a nationwide system of boarding schools intended to assimilate American Indians into mainstream culture. Over 10,000 indigenous children attended the school between 1879 and 1918. Despite idealistic beginnings, the school left a mixed and lasting legacy, creating opportunity for some students and conflicted identities for others. In this cemetery are 186 graves of students who died while at Carlisle.

Shubenacadie Indian Residential School

Every Child Matters
Concept of Two Spirit

- The term/identity of Two Spirit does not make sense unless it is contextualized within a Na>ve American/First Na>ons framework
- Two Spirit within a traditional setting was a gender analysis and not sexual orientation or gender identity
- Today, most people associate the term with LGBT Na>ves; however, these terms are not interchangeable
- Two Spirit is more aligned with the traditional understanding of the sacred roles within Tribes

Roles

- Held in Esteem...
  Although Two Spirit people were historically respected in many Nations, they were also, at times, feared because many were said to be people of strong medicine.
- Roles of Two Spirit people within Tribal communities
  - Namers and protectors of children
  - Counselors
  - Healers
  - Interpreters of dreams
  - Warriors
  - Mediators between genders
  - Brought by Tribal Leaders to negotiations of war and peace with other Tribes because they were said to be able to “see” beyond the physical

What is Two Spirit?

- Almost every Tribe had a name for us...
  And those names usually had something to do with transformation or change

Our young ones matter...

Revitalizing the roles once held by Two Spirit people

- Gay American Indians, San Francisco (1st Two Spirit-focused group started in 1975)
- Creation of many Two Spirit Societies and Alliances on Turtle Island (North America)
- Two Spirit people included in diversity celebrations, and other events such as major conferences and presentations, just like today’s
- Coming In ceremonies on and off Reservation
- National and International Two Spirit gatherings held on Turtle Island (North America)
Many still acknowledge us as people of medicine

- Carrying on the Traditional roles our Two Spirit Ancestors once held within their Tribes
- Going into the helping fields of social work, medicine, psychology, education, Tribal law, and politics
- Learning our languages and reclaiming our Traditional places in ceremonies
- Advocating for an end to the loss of our people to suicide, especially our Two Spirit relatives, and most especially, our Two Spirit children.

LGBT Coming Out Process

..."coming out" is typically a declaration of an independent identity: an LGBT person musters their courage and, anticipating conflict, announces their sexuality or gender identity to a friend or family member - at the risk of being met with anger, resistance, violence, flat-out rejection or abandonment...

Two Spirit Coming In Process

...an Aboriginal person comes to understand their relationship and value to their own family, community, culture, history and present-day world. "Coming in" is not a declaration or an announcement; it is simply presenting oneself authentically and being fully present as an Aboriginal person who understands that they have a spiritual responsibility to their People and to the Ancestors...

The Southwest Two Spirit Society

Buffalo Skull I painted and Gifted Them

History-making at the Gathering of Nations

In April of 2018, a group of Two Spirit people from all over Turtle Island journeyed to Albuquerque, NM.

Grand Entry

We knew that women went into the Arena on one side and men on the other... but some of us didn't identify with a binary gender...

So we fought with the Arena Director to come in together as a group
Our Royalty came into the Circle with all the rest of the royalty…
Our Miss International Two Spirit, Twix (Timothy) Ward, San Carlos Apache

…and one of us even competed in her Elders (70+) category

It wasn’t easy or pleasant

Finally, the Arena Director walked away and someone else told us to come in behind the men and without the Eagle Staff of the Southeast Two Spirit Society…our hosts in NM.

We stood our ground and kept reiterating…We are the Two Spirit People!”

We made history that weekend…

Another of us had a huge announcement and let us know first…

Fiction

- Many Two Spirit (and LGBT Natives) youth who end their lives have gender dysphoria or are experiencing difficulty with their sexual orientation
- Two Spirit people are all Trans-identified, or gender queer
- Competent health care is widely available for Two Spirit and LGBT Natives
- The residential/boarding school era which removed our children from their Tribes, Villages, homelands, kinship, and families didn’t impact Two Spirit children any more than it did other Indigenous children
Fact

- Many Two Spirit (and LGBT Native) youth who end their own lives do so because of bullying, lack of support from their Tribes and their families, and because they feel helpless and unsafe.
- Two Spirit people are Trans-identified, gender variant, gender non-conforming, asexual, same gender loving, cis gender, ALL of those, or NONE of those.
- Rarely is competent health care available to Two Spirit people or LGBT Natives in general.
- The residential/boarding school era was doubly hard on those Two Spirit babies who were punished severely when they were identified (usually through clothing) and the other children were taught to taunt and torture them with laughter and harsh words.

Healing Spirits

- If and when a Two Spirit young person trusts you enough to tell you who they are, honour and believe them.
- Be extremely attentive to pronouns, even if presentation may seem to you to indicate something contrary to how the person identifies themselves.
- It’s not up to us to identify the person coming for services... they are who they say they are.
- Do not ask “What are your preferred pronouns?” Instead, always ask “What are your pronouns?” Using the word “preferred” minimizes their reality and assumes choice.

What I wish my clinician knew (or even cared about) when working with me

Tips for working in culturally-affirming ways with Two Spirit people in general and youth in particular

- If you make a mistake, apologize, slow down, and be more deliberate in the future.
- Respectfully ask for assistance from others with identifying Two Spirit Elders in the Tribe. If the Tribe is less traditional in their ways, do an internet search for the nearest Two Spirit Society or Alliance and ask for help.
- Consult with behavioral health organizations such as WeRNative for advice, and materials. Pamphlets in your waiting room, and posters on your walls focusing on Two Spirit people act to indicate to them that they are welcome there and that it is a safe space.

And...

- Check your intake forms and other paperwork used in your services. Do you use binary gender markers? Is there room to talk about domestic partnerships rather than just the M, the S, and the D? (Kudos to the National Indian Health Board who uses Two Spirit on their conference registration form.)
- Whether you think you work with Two Spirit people or not, you probably do. Not all of us have completed our Coming In process.
- With that in mind, there are many fine YouTube videos and other information about the sacredness of Two Spirit people and how we were once honoured in our Tribes, Villages and communities. Learn a little about us...but make sure what you watch or read comes from us and not someone studying us.

Additional...

- If and when a Two Spirit young person trusts you enough to tell you who they are, honour and believe them.
- Be extremely attentive to pronouns, even if presentation may seem to you to indicate something contrary to how the person identifies themselves.
- It’s not up to us to identify the person coming for services... they are who they say they are.
- Do not ask “What are your preferred pronouns?” Instead, always ask “What are your pronouns?” Using the word “preferred” minimizes their reality and assumes choice.
And finally...
• Check your assessments and screening tools for language that could be re-traumatising to any Indigenous person
• Once we’ve returned to a more normal way of living, consider having a Two Spirit Talking Circle with Two Spirit Elders and allies and let the community know that it is happening – and come to the one today!
  
  But most of all
  o Be aware of your own biases
  o The re-traumatisation of people who come for services is real
  o If you have difficulty moving beyond your own biases, get supervision and remove yourself from working with Two Spirit individuals
  o Remember that it’s not about you...it’s about them

Decolonization is simply the intentional, reflective, and communal self-examination undertaken by Native (and other formerly colonized) peoples in service to collective action that finds continuity with the Traditional (pre-colonial) past even as it charts a purposeful, distinctive, and self-determined post-colonial future

Our Elders say……

Our Culture is our Cure

TWO SPIRIT PEOPLE ARE BUSY RE-CREATING THE ROLES HELD TRADITIONALLY BY OUR TWO SPIRIT ANCESTORS

While we might not all be people of medicine in the narrow sense of the definition, medicine is more than tobacco, sage, sweetgrass, cedar and corn pollen.

Medicine is also western and Traditional healing and healers, psychology, law, the arts, counselling, suicide prevention, and any other profession that lifts our People up...

We are Leaders of our Nations, psychologists, doctors, lawyers, and Tribal court judges. We run for presidency of the largest Tribal Nation on this side of Turtle Island. We star in movies, on and off Broadway, and on television. We write plays, music and novels.
...and we even win Amazing Race Canada

Best and Promising Practices for the Implementation of Zero Suicide in Indian Country

QUESTIONS & REFLECTIONS

Resources

- Zero Suicide Toolkit for Indian Country
- Two Spirit People Guide
- What is Two Spirit?
- What is Two Spirit (Youth)
- Two Spirit Documentary

Wela’lioq!

(Thank you everyone)

sali@edc.org